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France Charges 3 For Leaks to Press In Greenpeace Affair

No Perpetrators of Attack Accused So Far

By Michael Dobbs
Washington Post Foreign Service

PARIS, Sept. 24—The French government, which has conceded that its agents, acting under orders, had blown up the Greenpeace protest ship, today brought its first charges in the case. In an apparent attempt to put a stop to damaging newspaper revelations about the affair, the Defense Ministry charged three Army men with leaking secret information about the episode to the press.

The government of President Francois Mitterand, which has been rocked by the Greenpeace scandal and apparent cover-up, has thus far not brought charges against anyone involved in ordering or carrying out the attack that sank the vessel and killed a photographer.

Justice officials said that the three military men, who include two members of the secret services, were placed under house arrest. They are accused of jeopardizing national security by revealing information about the sinking of the vessel, the Rainbow Warrior, by French agents in New Zealand's territorial waters July 10.

The attempt to plug the leaks underlined the important role played

by the French press in revealing how the Rainbow Warrior was sabotaged by the French secret services which then attempted to cover up the operation. After rejecting allegations of French involvement for two months, the government conceded Sunday that the Greenpeace ship had been sunk by French agents acting under orders. The ship was preparing to sail to Mururoa Atoll in the South Pacific to protest French nuclear tests there.

Practically all the publicly available information that has emerged about the scandal has surfaced first in the columns of French newspapers and magazines and only later has been officially confirmed. By contrast, right-wing opposition politicians have been reluctant to take any initiative that might be seen as tarnishing the image of the French Army and secret services.

A backhanded compliment was paid to the media last week by President Francois Mitterand in a letter to Prime Minister Laurent Fabius in which he expressed exasperation about the lack of official information.

"Despite the investigations you have ordered, we still have to note that the press is coming up with

new elements," the president wrote.

In a country in which the press is traditionally much more respectful of politicians than in the United States, the aggressiveness of French newspapers in pursuing the Greenpeace story seems to have surprised even some journalists. Parallels have been drawn with the Watergate scandal.

But although there are similarities between the two cases, the contrasts are also striking. Unlike Watergate, which was initially pieced together thanks to laborious detective work by city reporters, most of the breaks in the Greenpeace affair seem to have come from politically motivated leaks by people in high places.

By paying careful attention to the different news media, political connoisseurs have had little difficulty tracing the progress of a struggle between different factions of the French establishment, each eager to promote its own version of the truth. The high-level feuding has been particularly evident over the last few days as a battle rages over who should be blamed for ordering the sinking of the Rainbow Warrior.

Attempts by Socialist politicians to pin the blame for the fiasco on the secret services have been resisted by "sources close to the DGSE," or General Directorate for External Security, the French equivalent of the CIA.

[Le Canard Enchaîné, an investigative and satirical weekly published on Wednesday, quoted Adm.

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Pierre Lacoste, who was dismissed as head of the DGSE, in its latest issue as saying "that the order to sink the Rainbow Warrior came from civilian officials," Joseph Fitchett of the International Herald Tribune reported.

[The admiral also said that he was ordered to lend agency operatives to a naval intelligence service responsible for security on Mururoa Atoll and that they were not under his command when the Rainbow Warrior was sunk.]

The "battle of the leaks" took a particularly vicious turn this week when a radio journalist close to the Defense Ministry reported that Prime Minister Fabius knew all about the cover-up. This was followed by another anonymous report by the French news agency Agence France-Presse, quoting "reliable sources," that vital dossiers about the Greenpeace affair had been destroyed by the secret service.

Today the Paris newspaper Le Monde, which played the major role in breaking the story of the cover-up last week, reported that an order to "neutralize" the Rainbow Warrior was given by the former defense minister, Charles Hernu. The story, which was couched in the conditional tense, provided no source for its report.

The suspicion that the media are being used as an instrument to settle political scores has provided a useful excuse for those newspapers that have been unable to come up with scoops of their own.

"It is remarkable that so much is being said about the triumph of investigative journalism What we have really seen is the triumph

of teleguided journalism," said an editorial in the right-wing Le Quotidien de Paris, which has done little to advance the Greenpeace story.

After Le Monde broke the news last week that a "third team" of French agents had bombed the Rainbow Warrior, other newspapers speculated that the information had originated with Interior Minister Pierre Joxe. In addition to being a rival of Hernu, the minister responsible for the DGSE, Joxe was reported to believe that the only way of resolving the affair was to admit the French role speedily.

"The hunt for Deep Throat is on," noted Le Monde, dismissing the comments of its competitors as sour grapes. For the record, it told its readers that its "Deep Throat" was not Pierre Joxe.

As the hunt for La Gorge Profonde, as Deep Throat is known in French, continues, justice officials released the names of three military men suspected of divulging top-secret information to the press. The accused include an Army colonel and a captain and a sergeant-major at the DGSE's center for combat divers in Corsica, the unit that conducted the sabotage operation.

The French government's investigator into the Greenpeace affair, Bernard Tricot, has been acknowledging that he was "taken in" by his informants, who included politicians as well as military leaders.

Confessing to Agence France-Presse that he now felt "very sad" at the cover-up, Tricot added: "I saw many people in connection with this affair. Clearly, among them there were some who hid the truth from me and others who lied to me."